

Foreword

David Bruhn has produced a book that should sit proudly in the bookcase of many Americans. It is a story of the forgotten fleet of World War II, the “Pacific Island Hoppers.” These included the APc coastal transports, PT boats, sub-chasers, minesweepers, and other small craft including the wooden 36-foot Higgins boats, which ferried out troops to hostile beaches during many of the amphibious landings in the Pacific theater of war. The amphibious operations along the Papua and New Guinea coasts included both sea-to-shore, and shore-to-shore (“leap frogging”) craft movements. The Army operated its own freight-supply ships, tugs and coastal tankers. The Navy’s small ships and craft were manned by Navy or Coast Guard personnel and the Army’s “island hoppers” by Coast Guardsmen, Merchant Mariners, and in a few cases by Soldiers.

The important contribution of these unsung vessels to the Pacific War effort is vividly told by the author. Many of these small ships and craft were exposed almost daily to Japanese gunfire and aircraft attacks. Typhoons and storms were a constant menace, and in the New Guinea area the energy-sapping heat was accompanied by high humidity resulting from frequent torrential rains. Daily showers were common, and on some days there was a downpour nearly every hour.

As the commanding officer of the USS *APc-15*, my ship was employed as a command and navigation ship to guide landing craft to enemy beaches during amphibious landings. Our other duties included hauling troops, ammunition, cargo, mail and supplies to established beachheads. The ship’s complement was three officers and twenty-seven enlisted men; all were reservists and few had any sea experience prior to the war. We had a chief motor machinist’s mate who was regular Navy but he got so seasick on the *APc-15* that he had to be transferred off the ship. The senior enlisted was a chief boatswain’s mate in his 40s, with prior service and who had been called back. The assignment of officers aboard was by official orders from the Bureau of Naval Personnel. After receiving my officer’s commission, I had served aboard the coastal minesweeper USS *Kingbird* (AMc-56)—a former Gloucester fishing vessel, the Governor *Saltonstall*—out of Boston, and I accordingly had a little more experience and was senior to the other two officers aboard the *APc-15*.

The safety of a ship’s crew and its morale is important, particularly in wartime. Thus, a commanding officer may sometimes purposely choose not to “follow the book.” As we made our way across the Pacific via Bora Bora, the Fijian Islands, Pago Pago, New Caledonia, and an independent ship transit across the Coral Sea to Brisbane, Australia, many of my crew were on the lookout in each port for additional weapons to augment the four 20mm guns on board the *APc-15*. The Navy Washington D.C. bureaucracy and the naval architect it employed to design the ship had their ideas regarding what constituted self-defense for small coastal transports, and the men going to war had their own ideas about adequate armament—the basic philosophy being “more firepower is better.” So, while I should have censured the men who “commandeered” machine guns from rear area shore bases, I was actually pleased with the ingenuity and resourcefulness they exhibited in looking out after our ship. I also bent the rules while the *APc-15* was at Cairns, Australia, for three and a half to four

months undergoing repairs following the fight off New Britain against a flight of Japanese dive bombers and fighter aircraft.

Although only a small community, Cairns hosted an excellent marine railway for hauling out damaged vessels for repair. The locals were very friendly, and we made friends with the proprietor of a hotel close to where the ship was dry-docked. I traded Navy rations for whisky and beer; not officially allowed. However, the Aussies got a chance to eat something besides lamb and the officers and the men enjoyed the spirits, although truthfully the whisky was not a good whisky and the beer was always warm.

Regarding the action off New Britain that is depicted on the book cover and adequately described herein, I will only add that it was over in two or three minutes, sufficient time for the *APc-15* to be lost or saved. We tragically lost good men that day and many others were injured, but our losses would have been much greater but for the collective heroic actions of the officers and men, of which I am very proud.

It is my pleasure to salute David Bruhn for his excellent story of courage and heroism by the small ships and their crews, both my *APc-15* and hundreds of other vessels. The personnel that manned and fought these little fellows were a courageous and valiant group. The book provides the public a long overdue tale of the small ships' contributions to victory in the Pacific, and is a deserved tribute to their personnel, who went in harm's way more often than you can imagine.

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